

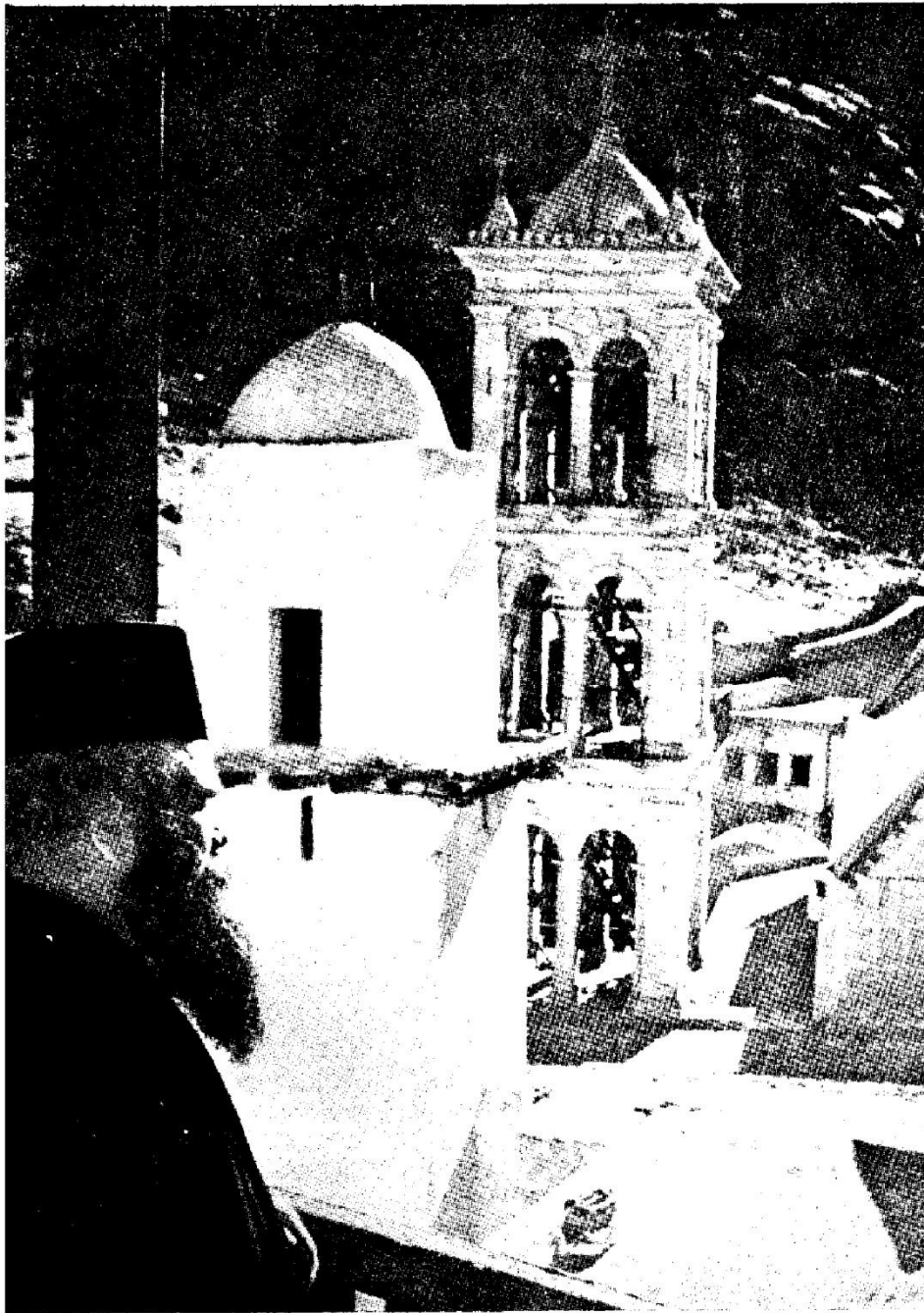
**Friendly Relations of**  
**Early Islam with**  
**Christianity**  
*and how they Deteriorated*

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The illustration, which is that of a mosque existing side by side with a church belfry at the Monastery of Mount Sinai, Egypt, is typically illustrative of the friendly relations of early Islam with Christianity

The later deterioration of their relations is mainly due to the political ambitions and religious fanaticism of some of their followers.

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## The Prophet and his Christian contemporaries

Much innocent blood has been shed during the last thirteen and a half centuries in the wars between Muslims and Christians. Alas! no end to it is yet in sight. It may seem strange enough, though it is a fact, as we shall presently see, that it was not so in early Islam; and the personal disposition of the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) was of the most sympathetic with regard to Christians and Christianity, not to speak of Jesus Christ himself, whom Islam is the only religion on earth excepting Christianity to recognize and venerate. An attempt is made in this essay to trace the causes both of the growing friendliness of Islamo-Christian relations and of their deterioration in the lifetime of the Prophet of Islam.

It is recorded by Ibn al-Jauziy that when the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) was a boy of eleven, he suffered from an eye ailment. The medical help in Mecca — one of the most advanced centres in the whole of Arabia in the matter of medical science in pre-Islamic days, judging from the fact that the biographical dictionaries of medical men in the Arabic language refer to several of them in those days, including one

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who had even compiled a book on hygiene before Islam in that city — proved of little avail. Therefore his grandfather, ‘Abd al-Muttalib, took him to a monk, who lived in a monastery near ‘Ukaz ([south-east of Mecca](#)), and the pre-scription of this Christian “doctor ” cured the sick boy. Without trying in any way to link up this incident with the following verse of the Qur’an, it will be permitted to observe that the verse in question reflects fairly well the ideas of early Muslims, and even of the Prophet himself, as regards Christian monks and hermits. So, we read in the Qur’an ([5:85](#)):

“And thou shalt surely find those among them to be most inclinable to entertain friendship for the Believers (i.e., Muslims), who say: ‘We are Christians This is because there are priests and monks among them, and because they are not elated with pride.’”

Here is another incident of the time when the Prophet was in the forty-fifth year of his life. During the five preceding years he had tried heart and soul to reform his people, and serving them selflessly by preaching to them the exalted concept of monotheism in order to sever them from the abomination of idolatry and other social evils. All was far from well to him; opposition was growing stronger daily, and had degenerated into persecution, both physical and mental. Not only the Prophet but also his disciples shared this persecution. The Prophet then advised his adherents to migrate and to take refuge in Abyssinia. This neighbouring country had long since been Christianized, and seems to have been in advance of Mecca both in civilization and prosperity. (Had it not invaded and annexed the Yemen, and sent an expedition, with the famous elephant, which reached the very gates of Mecca, an expedition on the arrival of which all the Meccans had taken to flight and found

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refuge nowhere except in the mountains? And were the Meccan merchants not leading trade caravans to that country as one of the markets for their products?)

Our sources do not mention any personal contact between the Prophet and his contemporary, the Negus of Abyssinia, yet they do mention the presence, in pre-Islamic days, of Meccan notables in the court of the Negus. Anyhow, when the Prophet counselled his persecuted disciples to migrate to Abyssinia, he told them, as reported by Ibn Hisham in his biography of the Prophet, p. 208, "If you could go to the country of the Abyssinians! For there rules a king by whom nobody is oppressed. It is a land of truth. Remain there until God makes for you some escape from what you are suffering." Moreover, the Prophet wrote a personal letter of recommendation, addressed to the Negus, and handed it over to Ja'far al-Taiyar, son of Abu Talib (a cousin of the Prophet), who was in the first batch of migrants. According to the historian Tabariy, the letter contained essentially this phrase, "I am sending towards thee my cousin, Ja'far, together with a number of Muslims. When he come to thee, give them hospitality ". [\(The tone of the letter suggests that there was some sort of previous acquaintance between the writer and the addressee.\)](#) The Muslim refugees were well received by the Christian king of the Abyssinians. Twice the pagans of Mecca sent diplomatic missions to persuade the Negus to extradite the fugitives; yet, unlike some modern "civilized" Christian countries, who let down even their faithful allies for motives not so very praiseworthy, the Negus twice refused to hand over the unfortunate Muslims who had taken refuge in his realm, even though they were so different from him in religion and race. The Negus is even reported to have bestowed upon different members of the refugee community, both male and female, from time to time, right royal gifts. The Sahih of al-Bukhari records that these Muslims, men and women,

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could even freely enter the Christian churches — he refers to a certain Santa Maria — and look at their decoration, etc.

Let non-Muslims impute to Islam whatever crimes of bloodthirstiness and fanatically aggressive wars they like, they may yet remember the tender corner which the Prophet had in his heart for the Christians of Abyssinia. Had he not offered hospitality, doing the duty personally — instead of asking his servants — to some of the Abyssinians who had once come to Medina as the envoys of the Negus? Has he not left an everlasting testament for the Muslims by ordering, “Leave the Abyssinians unmolested as long as they do not take an aggressive action against you” (*da'w al-Habashah ma wada'ukum*)? No war against the Christian Abyssinia, even though it be non-Islamic'.

## The Prophet's entry into Mecca and the picture of Mary and Jesus in the Ka'bah

Fifteen years had passed over this migration of the Muslims to a Christian country, and the Prophet was entering triumphantly the same Mecca from where he and his disciples were so mercilessly forced to escape to Medina. A very curious incident is recorded by the classical author al-Azraqiy in his ***Akhbar Makkah*** (“[History of the City of Mecca](#)”). This work is the source of practically all the later writers on the subject. As regards the authenticity of this incident, I have consulted not only the edition published in Europe, but also manuscripts in Turkey, and there is absolutely no question of interpolation. Al-Azraqiy says, “When in the year 8 A.H. (629 C.E.) the Prophet conquered Mecca and occupied the city, he cleared the compound of the holy sanctuary of the idols erected there to dishonour the House dedicated to the One God. Then he entered inside the Ka'bah itself. He found there several frescoes and mural



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paintings, which he was pained to see in the sanctuary erected by the iconoclast prophet Abraham. He ordered at once to efface them all. However, he put his palms on one of the pictures, and said, 'Efface them all except this one There was nothing other than the representation of the Virgin Mary with the child Jesus.'

These diverse incidents will perhaps show how sympathetically disposed was the Prophet towards Jesus Christ and Christians, even though he combated vehemently their beliefs and rites (which he believed were of later edition and did not form part of the teaching of Jesus Christ himself).

## How relations between the Muslims and the Christians deteriorated

It was in the last weeks of the year 6 A.H. (627 C.E.) that the Prophet decided to imitate his "brother ", Jesus Christ, and send foreign missions to preach Islam. Ibn Hisham and other trustworthy classical sources say that one day the Prophet assembled his companions and told them that he was going to select some of them for far-off missions, and hoped that they would not hesitate as the apostles of Jesus had hesitated when Jesus wanted to send them on missions. He told them the story of the apostles of Jesus Christ, then he selected a number of them, each to go to a particular country. The mission was not very difficult, not for life; they had only to carry letters of the Prophet, addressed to different rulers, inviting them to embrace Islam, and to answer any questions the rulers might put to them regarding Islam and its teachings. This is not the place to deal in detail with all the missions sent to Christian princes — the Byzantine Emperor, the Abyssinian Negus, the 'Egyptian chief of the Copts, etc. However, the fate of one of these religious missions concerns

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us directly. The Prophet had addressed a letter, of the same nature, to the Byzantine Governor of Busra (in Palestine, different from Basrah in Iraq). When he was travelling in the territory of Shurahbil Ibn 'Amr, a Christian chief of the Ghassanid tribe under the protection of the Byzantine emperor, he (*i.e., Shurahbil*) caught the ambassador, and in his Christian zeal put him to death without much ado.

This was evidently too flagrant a violation of all international custom and practice. What was worse, the Byzantine emperor would not set things right and amend the wrong done: on the contrary, he protected the criminal, merely because he happened to be a Christian. Early in the year 8 A.H. (629 C.E.) the Prophet sent an army of three thousand strong to punish the culprit himself. The expeditionary force found in Mu'tah (*now in Jordania*) that the emperor had sent an army of over one hundred thousand to oppose them. In spite of the unequal numbers, the Muslims would not retire : they attacked, lost their commander-in- chief, as also his second and third in command (*the second in command was Ja'far al-Taiyar, cousin of the Prophet, who had returned from Abyssinia some months earlier*). They still did not lose heart: the army elected on its own initiative a new commander, Khalid Ibn al-Walid, and continued to fight. When Khalid decided to retire to Medina, he had inflicted such punishment on the enemy that they dared not pursue the retiring opponent.

The following year (9 A.H.—630 C.E.) the Prophet led in person a stronger force (*of thirty thousand men this time*), made a halt in Tabuk (*in the extreme north of Arabia*), and sent a letter to Heraclius. The text is preserved in Arabic annals. It invited the Byzantine emperor to embrace Islam, or to pay a tribute, or at least assure a freedom of conscience in his territory so that anybody who desired to embrace the religion of Islam



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could do so safely. As Abu 'Ubaid, the famous traditionist, in his ***Kitab al-Amwal*** records, the emperor sent some gold coins as a gift. The evasive reply which accompanied them led the Prophet to conclude that he did not want peace, so the Prophet ordered that the imperial gift be credited to the war booty, and not to treat it as a friendly peaceful present. As to the demand of freedom of conscience to his subjects, the emperor put his Governor of Ma'an (in [Jordania](#)) to death. His only crime was that he had embraced Islam of his own free will, and had informed the Prophet of his action. ([The correspondence of this martyr Governor, Farwah, is preserved by the Arab historians.](#))

This sealed the possibility of all negotiations and mutual relations of peace and concord. A Ghassanid chief even prepared an expedition to attack Medina, although it did not materialize.

### **Abu Bakr seeks to establish peaceful relations with Heraclius**

Not long after, the Prophet fell ill, and on his deathbed he gave orders for the despatch of another army, under Usamah, to attack the country guilty of the murder of the Muslim ambassador and preparation of the projected attack on Medina. It provoked retaliation, and some months later the Caliph Abu Bakr was dragged into total war with the Byzantine empire. After his initial successes, he again sent an embassy to invite Heraclius to settle peacefully the mutual relations. Dhahabiy (in ***Tarikh Kabir***) and Abu Nu'aim (in ***al-Muntaqa min Dala'il al-Nubuwwah***) describe the audience in detail and tell that the emperor had an illustrated album of predictions, containing among others the portraits of ancient prophets, including that of Muhammad (ﷺ): and that to try the Muslim ambassador, he opened the page before its turn came; that it showed men riding on camels, etc. (Mas'udiy in his *Mura*) relates the

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same story regarding the Emperor of China.) The following extract from a recent French publication will be of interest in this connection:

**“BOOKS OF PREDICTIONS:** There existed in the imperial library a book which predicted the destinies of Byzantium, with pictures representing the emperors. The existence of an elucubration (i.e., work composed with effort and passing long time) of this kind is attested to by the strangers to whom this was shown (*cf. Emperor Leo VI, Discours et Oeuvres divers, P.G. 107, Leg. 39*). According to Antony, Bishop of Novgorod, Emperor Leo the Sage had copied a similar book written upon a roll, which he had discovered in the grave of the prophet Daniel (*cf. Antoine, Archbishop of Novgorod, Le Livre du Pelerin, I.R.S.O.L., 91*)” (translated from the French work of Louis Brehier. *La Civilisation Byzantine*, Paris, 1950. pp. 291-2).

This renewed effort of Abu Bakr again failed. What followed is well-known history. The astonishingly rapid con-quests of the Arabs are a record in world annals; and the aftermath. Crusades and others are still leaving Islamo-Christian relations undecided and far from satisfactory. God alone knows when man will learn the futility of resort to arms and fratricide.

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